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ABSTRACT

While pointing out some of the criticism being leveled at the social studies in recent years, this paper suggests a need to reassess the historical development of the social studies as part of the public school curriculum. It argues that such a reassessment is needed to resolve present difficulties and effect future possibilities. The period 1890-1920 is crucial to examine. Concern during this period for the manner in which young people were educated to fulfill their political, social, and economic roles played a prominent role in the development of the social studies. Since sufficient historical perspective has not yet been obtained, three possible models are offered to interpret the formative history (1890-1920) of the social studies: the conventional model views its development as an inevitable outgrowth of national progress; the revisionist model saw it as an effort to produce quiescent labor for capitalistic enterprise; and the cultural politics model saw social study's emergence as a reaction to cultural disintegration. Since 1920 the direction of the social studies has been influenced by three competing traditions: the conventional tradition emphasizes social science content; the second tradition centers on inquiry process; and the third tradition focuses on citizenship. (Author/JK)

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Reinterpreting the History of the Social Studies

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Reinterpreting the History of
the Social Studies

Needs

In recent years the public schools and their curriculum and especially the social studies have become the targets of severe criticism. For example, Colin Greer and his like-minded revisionists claim that the schools have failed historically in their proclaimed mission of providing equal educational opportunity for young people. Robert Dreeben and others speak of the "hidden" or implicit curriculum as being much more meaningful and pervasive for children than the overt content of classes such as in the social studies. The social studies has traditionally professed for itself long lists of grandiose objectives manifestly unobtainable. Surveys of students' (and adults') knowledge of the social studies have rather consistently produced dismaying results. An anthropologist has characterized "the important curriculum in the social studies" as a "null curriculum," meant to be empty and sterile.

Within the social studies itself it is history which is coming under the heaviest attacks. Some of you are undoubtedly familiar with the two-year survey, "Status of History in the Schools," conducted by a committee of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) and published in the September 1975 issue of the Journal of American History. That survey discovered that history teachers and teaching are facing a nationwide crisis in secondary and higher education. The committee said national confidence and interest in history are waning, and "doubts about its usefulness for the individual and for society now exert a large influence on attitudes and decisions."

"History is losing out to the other social sciences," was the conclusion. A prime example of the opposition may be found in an article entitled "Our Unfortunate Satisfaction with Clio." In it David Kellum puts the argument most forcefully and deserves to be quoted at length:

> Regicide is always intriguing and usually the result of desperation. The situation of the social studies programs in the public schools is desperate. The base of the so-called social studies program is history, queen of the social sciences. The fact that we are almost exclusively teaching history is undeniable. We employ the quotations and axioms of buffoons and scoundrels of the past as magical incantations to rid us of the demons which confront us in the modern world. Clio rules over all and our treatment of her amounts to pure ritualism.
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> Recently, an associate of mine in the Department of History remarked on the future of history in the classroom. His view was that Clio was not only dying, but that she was being done in systematically by something less than inspired instructors. . . . My own feeling is that Clio's case is terminal.
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> Rather than make the attempt to revitalize her, I would suggest that she has lived out her normal life. The time has come to bring Clio to as swift and merciful an end as possible in the classroom, draw the curtain, toll the bell, give her a burial that befits a queen, and be done with it. And when she is dead it will be truthfully said of her that in the end she was quite senile, possessed of a vivid memory as so often attends senility, but pathetically mindless, memory without mind.

All of these various contentions and criticisms suggest a need to reassess the development of the social studies as a part of the public school curriculum. Like our other cultural inventions the social studies emerged in response to particular needs in a particular time and place, proved itself adaptable to changing circumstances, and through time has persisted at least in part on sheer momentum. The needs that called forth the social studies, the particular historical circumstances and the ways in which subsequent historians have conceived of this curriculum field all require reexamination. No adequate resolution of the present difficulties

nor visior of future possibilities can be effected until we are "released from the coercions and distorted versions" of our traditions. Such a release calls for multiplying our angles of vision on the rise of the social studies.

In A Charter for the Social Sciences in the Schools, published in 1932, Charles Beard outlined the chief determinants of the field: "Instruction in the social studies in the schools is conditioned by the spirit and letter of scholarship, by the realities and ideas of the society in which it is carried on, and by the nature and limitations of the teaching and learning process at the various grade levels across which it is distributed." My argument today is that the nature of the historical relationship between the social studies and the "realities and ideas of the society," to use Beard's phrase, deserves far more attention than it has received. The emergence of the social studies at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth suggests that there were transformations taking place in the manner of socialization, in the relation of school life to patterns of socialization, and in the use of the curriculum as a means of social control, all of which merit scholarly attention.

The study of curriculum in general has failed to consider its historical precedents. In fact it has only been in the past quarter century that prominent historians such as Bernard Bailyn and Lawrence Cremin have made the study of educational history a respectable enterprise for historians. The social studies has shared in this historical neglect. According to Hazel Hertzberg, the social studies are "extraordinary poor in historical accounts and interpretations. The evolution of the social studies has remained largely neglected as a subject of historical inquiry." Why should

this be the case? Hertzberg avers that in the social studies "historians have been activists rather than recorders and interpreters of the historical dimensions of their own activities."

> The past of the social studies lives not as written history but as a kind of academic folklore; people acquire a sense of development and change from their own experience and from hearing the tales of their elders. It is thus possible for major movements to run their course and disappear from current consciousness, continuing to affect present behavior in ways largely unrecognized, while the records and artifacts of such movements are gradually forgotten.

And so the point of this symposium is to bring to wider attention "historical accounts and interpretations" of areas of the social studies which have caught our imaginations--be it the Rugg Curriculum, the Problems of Democracy course, or the oral history of the field's pioneers. For us as historians it makes no sense and is professionally debilitating to argue the merits of the social studies or the relative value of the social sciences vs. the study of history without cultivating a sense of historical development.

My own interest centers in the early years. Historians customarily fix upon the year 1916 to mark the beginning of the social studies in American public secondary schools for in that year the Committee on Social Studies of the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education published its seminal report. This attachment of significance is notable on several accounts. First, it exhibits the typical practice followed by students of the social studies in assessing its growth in terms of what Rolla Tryon labeled "Efforts of National Organizations in Behalf of the Social Sciences as School Subjects." According to this view, the social studies evolved chiefly through the study and work done by learned societies and other groups "of national scope" in producing recommendations which subsequently influenced individual districts, schools, and teachers to

modify their practices to conform to the most recent professional wisdom. Secondly, it locates the beginning of the social studies at a particular point in history, as occurring in the course of a surge of other reforms, all of which have come to be loosely identified with the Progressive Movement.

Apparently conditions in the period from 1890 to 1920 occasioned great turmoil, concern and activity regarding the manner in which young people were to be educated in order to fulfill political, social and economic roles. A nationwide "search for order," in Wiebe's phrase, congealed with profound impact upon the public schools and played a prominent role in shaping the development of the social studies. In response to diverse influences and within a relatively short span of years, school people extended and amplified the role which courses in the social studies were to play in producing suitably socialized young men and women.

In addition, the incipient social studies curriculum served as a battleground for completion over various sorts of power. The emerging social science organizations and the recently established historians skirmished for position and status. Educators tried to make use of the schools and their curriculum to respond to the putative need for social and civic efficiency. Ethnic groups struggled to retain their cultural identity and integrity in the face of imposing trends toward standardization and a shared ideology. These conflicts all found a common arena in the social studies curriculum of the public schools.

Now, I'm trying to make two points here. First, in my judgment the period 1890-1920 is the crucial one to examine in terms of the history of the social studies. As Dick Gross has observed, little if anything of importance has changed in the past 60 years. We seem to be unable to break

out of the mold established by the NEA's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education in 1916 and 1918.

Second, I don't believe we have yet obtained sufficient historical perspective to be in a position to write the history of the social studies. We are still at a rudimentary stage in the development of our knowledge about education and socialization of young people, such that it would be foolish to limit our conceptions to a single line of argument. So I'd like to suggest for your consideration three possible models and then briefly touch on the development of the curriculum since 1916.

Models

The first interpretation, the conventional model, has shaped discourse in the field for several decades now. The work of Henry Johnson, Rolla Tryon, and Edgar Wesley--highly praised by other professionals when they appeared, cited by social science journals, encyclopedic resources, and doctoral studies, frequently referred to by methods texts in social studies teacher education throughout the last three decades--have cast the mold within which we attempt to understand the social studies' genesis.

Tryon, Johnson, and Wesley were able to distinguish the three decades from 1890 to 1920 from what went before and from what came after. Prior to 1890 was a period of inchoate beginnings as the individual components of the social studies, particularly history, struggled to gain recognition for themselves as academic disciplines and as legitimate curriculum subjects. The 1890s witnessed the beginning of the era of national curriculum committees concerned with reshaping the form and content of all curriculum areas along more rational, more modern lines. In 1892, 1899, and again in 1913, groups of scholars and educators were summoned together to bring order to the social studies. According to Wesley and the others, the committee reports were well and widely accepted.

Although this conventional model tells us a good deal about the efforts of professional committees, it neglects other areas of importance. There is, for example, no analysis of the relation of the developing social studies to the other changes in education and society which were going on at an accelerated pace during the same time. Attention is concentrated on the role of prominent professionals as the means by which educational ferment impinged on social studies programs. The authors and shapers of this model were themselves prominent professionals in the field.

The professional committee members are seen as meliorists, blending social pressures, subject matter, and the constraints of the classroom into a viable curriculum.

The historians of the conventional model could trace how the social studies had grown mightily between 1890 and 1920 and could document how it had gained a place of elaboration and prominence in the secondary curriculum, but they were unable to demonstrate any particular consequences for students or society. They had to be content with the faith that because public schooling was growing and attaining stature as a key social institution in an America rapidly achieving preeminence among the nations, then the emerging social studies must be partaking of and contributing to that enhanced stature.

Within the last 10 or 15 years revisionist historians have begun to analyze more critically the patterns of public education delineated by Cubberley and his successors. The revisionists have discovered less a pattern of triumphant evolution within the public schools, than a model of how schooling inevitably corresponds to changes in the social relations of production.

Where Cubberley would cite abstract ideals of democracy or equal

opportunity as motivating forces behind the transformation of the schools, revisionists such as Michael Katz or Clarence Karier would examine the consolidation of corporate economic and political power. This consolidation required, in turn, new forms of bureaucratic organization and by implication more useful kinds of curriculum within the schools.

The revisionists have infrequently concentrated on the social studies or any other subject area, partially because they have only begun to explore the process of schooling and partially because they have viewed the organizational forms and implicit messages of the schools as more important for historical understanding than the content of the curriculum. It is possible, however, to apply revisionists' key concepts--social control and coercion, for example--to the history of the social studies and to make at least a provisional interpretation from that point of view.

On a broad scale revisionists have viewed the rapid expansion of schooling in this country as a means by which the middle and upper classes attempted to maintain dominance over the working class and the poor. Thus the schools' functions became twofold: to maintain social order by molding each individual for conformity to society's wishes (as interpreted by upperclass spokesmen); and to train each individual to see his prime obligation as service and sacrifice for the good of the social whole. A third function detected by the revisionists was to cloak the first two functions in a mantle of liberal, reform rhetoric. Schools were promoted as a place in which individuals could obtain the benefits of democracy and equality of opportunity. When those conditions were not obtained--when root social problems remained--the blame could then be placed on individuals' inadequacies rather than on institutional failures.

A third possible interpretation, the cultural politics model, operates on the assumption that educational changes in the period 1890-1920 were neither an inevitable concomitant of national progress nor a co-ordinated effort to produce quiescent labor for capitalistic enterprise. Rather the emergence of the social studies was a reaction to a general perception of cultural disintegration. The social studies could help validate a cultural unanimity which had apparently lost its coherence. Of course the public rhetoric of educators infrequently spoke of cultural doubt and despair. Their task was setting a tone of uplift and progressive momentum. It was often left to the poets and writers of America to explore the darker perceptions of society. The great majority of people did not move about sunk in despairing individual gloom. Life is largely lived in terms of one's daily existence, and in terms of material well-being the early twentieth century displayed numerous signs that more and more people were doing well. Still, anxiety about America--while not the whole of peoples' moods and while not constant--was experienced somewhere in the back of many minds. People uncertain of the value of their society's cultural contours requisitioned an educational system which would compel allegiance. The demands on the field of the social studies tended to intensify.

The decades around the turn of the century witnessed an ever-increasing flow of immigrants, a decided quickening in the pace and complexity of urban, industrial life. This transformation in American life, although it held great promise of material well being and national superiority, was being accomplished at such a rapid rate that many people were losing their sense of cultural moorings. So a dramatic contrast was being played out between aggressive optimism on the one hand and cultural anxiety on the other.

To relieve such anxiety intellectuals sought to explain rationally the new directions society was taking and concerned policy makers tried to reshape social institutions into forms which would provide a coherent structure for society. The burgeoning public schools were one obvious place where new members of society could be rather uniformly socialized and where the newer patterns of knowledge could be introduced as legitimate and binding.

The social studies as much as any other curriculum area responded to these developments. The social sciences with some difficulty became an approved part of the curriculum. Yet because social scientists were most interested in developing their own academic identity, they never achieved the prominence in social education they might have. Sensitivity to desires for national unity on the part of a substantial number of historians was one factor which enabled history to retain its prominent place within the social studies.

Academics and professionals worked together in these years to determine suitable curriculum. They were part of the widespread effort to define the official culture for a new society. Their rationalizing efforts included moving toward universal (compulsory) schooling; seeking out the fundamentals underlying the curriculum (Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education): objectifying the curriculum into minute particulars; and shifting from an emphasis on ethical behavior to good citizenship as the goal of social education.

Social studies educators in this period of ferment chose for the most part a conciliatory role. The study of history and the social sciences served in effect to obscure issues arising from the competing value systems of diverse cultural groups. Emotion could enter the social studies classroom only under the sponsorship of patriotism. Such a classroom would either sustain a commitment to a set of particularly American values and goals or it

would abet no strong commitment at all. Rather than make the issues confronting American society the subject matter of the social studies; rather than have young people inquire into alternative visions for America and themselves; educators opted for a carefully delimited curriculum dealing in ratified knowledge of an objective origin, that is to say, culturally inoffensive history.

Traditions

These three historical interpretations apply to the social studies' formative years; they attempt to give meaning to the field; and they deserve to be tested in turn against the evidence of those turn-of-the-century decades. Once, however, the social studies had been firmly established as a curriculum area, say by 1920, the search for meaning shifts, from external relations with the realities and ideas of the society which prompted it, to internal considerations of the field.

Since early in the century until today three competing traditions have vied with one another to determine direction for the social studies and continue to do so. The conventional tradition, defined by Edgar Wesley, has considered the social studies as "the social sciences simplified for pedagogical purposes," (including history as a social science). The emphasis here has been on the nature of the content, the input, the body of material on which students were to operate.

The second tradition has viewed the social studies as essentially a process of reflective inquiry. Originating with the philosophy of John Dewey and given prominence in the 1916 Social Studies report, it centers not on a particular input or content, but upon the solving of significant social problems according to a structured method.

The third general tradition has found its substance neither in the input nor in the process, but in the outcome or product of learning. Enshrined in the 1916 report is the notion that has become the sine qua non of the social studies--the development of good citizenship. Citizenship in this tradition, as Barth and Shermis point out, is defined implicitly, in normative terms, as "commitment to values which reflect the accepted behavior of the community that the school services."

While the framework of the social studies has remained relatively stable since 1916, the conflicts within the field have pitched back and forth, tending to reflect the divergent traditions roughly sketched above. Many teachers have been most comfortable operating within the first position, the social studies taught as social science. Others have preferred to make history a willing servant of good citizenship. Still others--a handful--have attempted to provide appropriate problem cases for the social studies as reflective inquiry.

I discern two messages for us as historians of the social studies in this turmoil. First, much more effort can usefully be expended in studying the early history of the social studies, testing and refining models of interpretation. Second, the nature of the social studies is not already determined and the shape of its future is not assured. The writings of educators and historians of the social studies reveal that there was a trememdous amount of ambivalence contained within the social studies movement. Many elements of that ambivalence remain to confound us today.

A difference exists though between then and now. In the early twentieth century the trend of society was taken as set in the direction of an urban, industrialized America. The problem was how to paper over, or reconcile, or ameliorate, the disparities and incongruencies which

might act as roadblocks to the new order. Today we can more readily accept the existence of cultural confusion and competing interests. We can acknowledge the shakiness of our culture. Whatever its merits at one time, our urban, industrial society is not working well presently. What we see as current trends need not, indeed, had better not, equal destiny. We can make use of the schools to examine equivocal, paradoxical visions and directions, instead of ignoring them, as the social studies of the past tried to do.

One of my favorite historians, William Irwin Thompson, has said that it is only human for a writer to expect that history will grow in his or her direction. Viewing the origins of the social studies from the vantage points of different models reminds one that the process of history is beyond one's own ideology and that historical developments will continue to be as profoundly ambiguous as existence always has been. We commonly assume that history tells us what has happened in the past. Only when we are no longer sure about the significance of past action do we begin to ask what it really meant, and then another sort of history begins to be written. For then the study of history takes on the color and depth of an inquiry into meaning. It remains for us to shape meaning out of the history of the social studies.